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THE CHURCH:

A

DISCOURSE,

DELIVERED IN THE

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, PHILADELPHIA,

SUNDAY, MAY 30, 1841.

BY WM. E. CHANNING, D. D.

GLASGOW:
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THE CHURCH.

MATTHEW vii. 21—27.

Not every man that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say unto me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

Therefore, whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock; and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock.

And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand; and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house, and it fell: and great was the fall of it.

THESE words, which form the conclusion of Christ's Sermon on the Mount, teach a great truth, namely, that there is but one thing essential in religion; and this is, the doing of God's will, the doing of those sayings or precepts of Christ, which constitute the substance of that memorable discourse. We learn, that it will avail us nothing to call Christ Lord, Lord, to profess ourselves his disciples, to hear his words, to teach in his name, to take our place in his church, or even to do wonderful works or miracles in attestation of his truth, if we neglect to cherish the spirit and virtues of his religion. God heeds not what we say, but what we are and what we do. The subjection of our wills to the divine; the mortification of sensual and selfish propensities; the cultivation of supreme love to God, and of universal justice and charity towards our neighbour; this, this is the very essence of religion; this, alone, places us on a rock; this is the end, the supreme and ultimate good, and is to be prized and sought above all other things.

This is a truth as simple as it is grand. The child can understand it; and yet men, in all ages, have contrived to overlook it; have contrived to find substitutes for purity of heart and life; have hoped by some other means to commend themselves to God, to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Forms, creeds, churches, the priesthood, the sacraments, these and other things, have been exalted into supremacy. The grand and only qualification for heaven, that which in itself is

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heaven, the virtue and the spirit of Jesus Christ, has been obscured, depreciated; whilst assent to certain mysteries, or union with certain churches, has been thought the narrow way that leads to life. I have not time in a single discourse to expose all the delusions which have spread on this subject. I shall confine myself to one, which is not limited to the past, but too rife in our own times.

There has always existed and still exists, a disposition to attach undue importance to "the church" which a man belongs to. To be a member of the "true church," has been insisted on as essential to human salvation. Multitudes have sought comfort, and not seldom found their ruin, in the notion that they were embraced in the motherly arms of "the true church," for with this they have been satisfied. Professed Christians have fought about "the church," as if it were a matter of life and death. The Roman Catholic shuts the gate of Heaven on you, because you will not enter his "church." Among the Protestants are those who tell you, that the promises of Christianity do not belong to you, be your character what it may, unless you receive the Christian ordinances from the ministers of their church. Salvation is made to flow through a certain priesthood, through a hereditary order, through particular rites administered by consecrated functionaries. Even among denominations in which such exclusive claims are not set up, you will still meet the idea, that a man is safer in their particular church than elsewhere; so that something distinct from Christian purity of heart and life, is made the way of salvation.

This error I wish to expose. I wish to show, that Christ's spirit, Christ's virtue, or "the doing of the Sermon on the Mount," is the great end of our religion, the only essential thing, and that all other things are important only as ministering to this. I know, indeed, that very many acknowledge the doctrine now expressed. But too often their conviction is not deep and living, and it is impaired by superstitious notions of some mysterious saving influence in the church or in some other foreign agency. To meet these erroneous tendencies, I shall not undertake to prove in a formal way, by logical process, the supreme importance, blessedness, and glory of righteousness, of sanctity, of love towards God and man, or to prove that nothing else is indispensable. This truth shines by its own light. It runs through the whole New Testament; and is a gospel written in the soul by a divine hand. To vindicate it against the claims set up for the church, nothing is needed but to offer a few plain remarks in the order in which they rise up of themselves to my mind.

I begin with the remark, that in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said nothing about the Church; nor do we find him or his disciples laying down anywhere a definite plan for its organization or a ritual for its worship. Nor ought this to surprise us. It was the very thing to be expected in such a religion as Christianity. Judaism was intended to educate a particular nation, half-civilised and surrounded with the grossest idolatry, and accordingly it hedged them in by multiplied and rigid forms. But Christianity proposes as its grand aim, to spread the inward spiritual worship of God through all nations, in all stages of society, under all varieties of climate, government, and condition, and such a religion cannot be expected to confine itself to any particular outward shape. Especially when we

consider, that it is destined to endure through all ages, to act on all, to blend itself with new forms of society and with the highest improvements of the race, it cannot be expected to ordain an immutable mode of administration, but must leave its modes of worship and communion to conform themselves silently and gradually to the wants and progress of humanity. The rites and arrangements which suit one period, lose their significance or efficiency in another. The forms which minister to the mind now, may fetter it hereafter, and must give place to its free unfolding. A system wanting this freedom and flexibleness would carry strong proof in itself of not having been intended for universality. It is one proof of Christ's having come to "inherit all nations," that he did not institute for all nations and all times a precise machinery of forms and outward rules, that he entered into no minute legislation as to the worship and government of his church, but left these outward concerns to be swayed by the spirit and progress of successive ages. Of consequence, no particular order of the church can be essential to salvation. No church can pretend, that its constitution is defined and ordained in the Scriptures so plainly and undeniably, that whoever forsakes it gives palpable proof of a spirit of disobedience to God. All churches are embraced by their members with equal religious reverence, and this assures us, that in all, God's favour may be equally obtained.

It is worthy of remark, that, from the necessity of the case, the church assumed at first a form which it could not long retain. It was governed by the Apostles who had founded it, men who had known Christ personally, and received his truth from his lips, and witnessed his resurrection, and were enriched above all men by the miraculous illuminations and aids of his spirit. These presided over the church with an authority peculiar to themselves, and to which none after them could, with any reason, pretend. They understood "the mind of Christ," as none could do but those who had enjoyed so long and close an intimacy with him; and not only were they sent forth with miraculous powers, but by imposition of their hands similar gifts of the Spirit were conferred on others. This presence of inspired Apostles and supernatural powers gave to the primitive church obvious and important distinctions, separating it widely from the form which it was afterwards to assume. Of this we have a remarkable proof in a passage of Paul, in which he sets before us the offices or functions exercised in the original church. "God hath set in the church apostles, prophets, teachers, gifts of healing, helps, governments, diversities of tongues."* Now, of all these endowments or offices, one only, that of teacher, remains in our day. The Apostles, the founders and heroes of the primitive church, with their peculiar powers, have vanished, leaving as their representatives their writings to be studied alike by all. Teachers remain, not because they existed in the first age, but because their office, from its nature and from the condition of human nature, is needed still. The office, however, has undergone an important change. At first the Christian teacher enjoyed immediate communication with the Apostles, and received miraculous aids, and thus enjoyed means of knowledge possessed by none of his successors. The Christian min-

* 1 Cor. xii. 28.

ister now, can only approach the Apostles as other men do, that is, through the Gospels and Epistles which they have left us; and he has no other aid from above in interpreting them, than every true Christian enjoys. The promise of the Holy Spirit, that greatest of promises, is made without distinction, to every man of every office or rank, who perseveringly implores the Divine help; and this establishes an essential equality among all. Whether teachers are to continue in the brighter ages which prophecy announces, is rendered doubtful by a very striking prediction of the times of the Messiah: "In those days," saith the Lord, "I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest."* Is it possible that any man, with a clear comprehension of the peculiarity of the primitive church, can look back to this as an immutable form and rule, can regard any church form as essential to salvation, can ascribe to outward ordinances, so necessarily fluctuating, an importance to be compared with that which belongs to the immutable everlasting distinctions of holiness and virtue?

The church, as at first constituted, presents interesting and beautiful aspects. It was not a forced and arbitrary, but free, spontaneous union. It grew out of the principles and feelings of human nature. Our nature is social. We cannot live alone. We cannot shut up any great feeling in our hearts. We seek for others to partake it with us. The full soul finds at once relief and strength in sympathy. This is especially true in religion, the most social of all our sentiments, the only universal bond on earth. In this law of our nature, the Christian church had its origin. Christ did not establish it in a formal way. If you consult the New Testament, you do not find Jesus or his Apostles setting about the task of forming an artificial organization of the first disciples. Read in the book of Acts, the simple, touching narratives of the union of the first converts. They were of one heart and one soul. They could not be kept asunder. The new truth melted them into one mass, knit them into one body. In their mutual love, they could not withhold from one another their possessions, but had all things in common. Blessed unity! a type of that oneness and harmony, which a purer Christianity is to spread through all nations. Among those early converts, the most gifted and enlightened were chosen to be teachers in public assemblies. To these assemblies the brotherhood repaired with eagerness, to hear expositions of the new faith, to strengthen one another's loyalty to Christ, and to be open witnesses of him in the world. In their meetings they were left very much to follow the usages of the synagogue, in which they had been brought up; so little did Christianity trouble itself about forms. How simple, how natural this association! It is no mystery. It grew out of the plainest wants of the human heart. The religious sentiment, the spirit of love towards God and man, awakened afresh by Christ, craved for a new union through which to find utterance and strength. And shall this church union, the growth of the Christian spirit, and so plainly subordinate to it, usurp

* Jeremiah xxxi. 33, 34.

its place, or in any way detract from its sole sufficiency, from its supreme, unrivalled glory?

The church, according to its true idea and purpose, is an association of sincere, genuine followers of Christ; and at first this idea was, in a good degree, realised. The primitive disciples were drawn to Christ by conviction. They met together and confessed him, not from usage, fashion, or education, but in opposition to all these. In that age, profession and practice, the form and the spirit, the reality and the outward signs of religion went together. But with the growth of the church, its life declined; its great idea was obscured; the name remained, and sometimes little more than the name. It is a remarkable fact, that the very spirit to which Christianity is most hostile, the passion for power, dominion, pomp, and pre-eminence, struck its deepest roots in the Church. The church became the very stronghold of the lusts and vices which Christianity most abhors. Accordingly, its history is one of the most melancholy records of past times. It is sad enough to read the bloodstained annals of worldly empires; but when we see the spiritual kingdom of Christ, a prey for ages to usurping popes, prelates, or sectarian chiefs, inflamed with bigotry and theological hate and the lust of rule, and driven by these fires of hell to grasp the temporal sword, to persecute, torture, imprison, butcher their brethren, to mix with and embitter national wars, and to convulse the whole Christian world, we experience a deeper gloom, and are more tempted to despair of our race. History has not a darker page than that which records the persecutions of the Albigenses, or the horrors of the Inquisition. And when we come to later times, the church wears anything rather than holiness inscribed on her front. How melancholy to a Christian, the history lately given us by Ranke, of the reaction of Catholicism against Protestantism! Throughout, we see the ecclesiastical powers resorting to force as the grand instrument of conversion; thus proving their alliance not with heaven, but with earth and hell. If we take broad views of the church, in any age or land, how seldom do we see the prevalence of true sanctity! How many of its ministers preach for lucre or display, preach what they do not believe, or deny their doctrines in their lives! How many congregations are there, made up in a great degree of worldly men and women, who repair to the house of God from usage, or for propriety's sake, or from a vague notion of being saved!—not from thirst for the divine spirit, not from a fulness of heart, which longs to pour itself forth in prayer and praise. Such is the church. We are apt, indeed, to make it an abstraction, or to separate it in our thoughts from the individuals who compose it; and thus it becomes to us a holy thing, and we ascribe to it strange powers. Theologians speak of it as a unity, a mighty whole, one and the same in all ages; and in this way the imagination is cheated into the idea of its marvellous sanctity and grandeur. But we must separate between the theory or the purpose of the church, and its actual state. When we come down to facts, we see it to be not a mysterious, immutable unity, but a collection of fluctuating, divided, warring individuals, who bring into it, too often, hearts and hands anything but pure. Painful as it is, we must see things as they are; and so doing, we cannot but be struck with the infinite absurdity of ascribing to such a church mysterious powers, of supposing that it

can confer holiness on its members, or that the circumstance of being joined to it is of the least moment in comparison with purity of heart and life.

Purity of heart and life, Christ's spirit of love towards God and man; this is all in all. This is the only essential thing. The church is important only as it ministers to this; and every church which so ministers, is a good one, no matter how, when, or where it grew up, no matter whether it worship on its knees or on its feet, or whether its ministers are ordained by pope, bishop, presbyter, or people; these are secondary things, and of no comparative moment. The church which opens on heaven, is that and that only in which the spirit of heaven dwells. The church whose worship rises to God's ear, is that and that only where the soul ascends. No matter whether it be gathered in cathedral or barn; whether it sit in silence or send up a hymn; whether the minister speak from carefully prepared notes, or from immediate, fervent, irrepressible suggestion. If God be loved, and Jesus Christ be welcomed to the soul, and his instructions be meekly and wisely heard, and the solemn purpose grow up to do all duty amidst all conflict, sacrifice, and temptation, then the true end of the church is answered. "This is no other than the house of God, the gate of heaven."

In these remarks, I do not mean that all churches are of equal worth. Some, undoubtedly, correspond more than others to the spirit and purpose of Christianity, to the simple usages of the primitive disciples, and to the principles of human nature. All have their superstitions and corruptions, but some are more pure than the rest; and we are bound to seek that which is purest, which corresponds most to the Divine will. As far as we have power to select, we should go to the church where we shall be most helped to become devout, disinterested, and morally strong. Our salvation, however, does not depend on our finding the best church on earth; for this may be distant, or unknown. Amidst diversities of administrations, there is the same spirit. In all religious societies professing Christ as their Lord, the plainest, grandest truths of religion will almost certainly be taught, and some souls may be found touched and enlightened from above. This is a plain, undeniable fact. In all sects, various as they are, good and holy men may be found; nor can we tell in which the holiest have grown up. The church, then, answers its end in all; for its only end is to minister to human virtue. It is delightful to read, in the records of all denominations, the lives of eminent Christians, who have given up everything for their religion, who have been faithful unto death, who have shed around them the sweet light and fragrance of Christian hope and love. We cannot, then, well choose amiss, if we choose the church, which, as it seems to us, best represents the grand ideas of Christ, and speaks most powerfully to our consciences and hearts. This church, however, we must not choose for our brother. He differs from us probably in temperament, in his range of intellect, or in the impressions which education and habit have given him. Perhaps the worship which most quickens you and me, may hardly keep our neighbour awake. *He* must be approached through the heart and imagination; *we* through the reason. What to him is fervour, passes with us for noise. What to him is an imposing form, is to us vain show.

Condemn him not. If in his warmer atmosphere he builds up a stronger faith in God and a more steadfast choice of perfect goodness than ourselves, his church is better to him than ours to us.

One great error in regard to churches, contributes to the false estimate of them as essential to salvation. We imagine, that the church, the minister, the worship, can do something for us mechanically; that there are certain mysterious influences in what we call a holy place, which may act on us without our own agency. It is not so. The church and the minister can do little for us in comparison with what we must do for ourselves, and nothing for us without ourselves. They become to us blessings through our own activity. Every man must be his own priest. It is his own action, not the minister's, it is the prayer issuing from his own heart, not from another's lips, which aids him in the church. The church does him good, only as by its rites, prayers, hymns, and sermons, it wakes up his spirit to think, feel, pray, praise, and resolve. The church is a help, not a force. It acts on us by rational and moral means, and not by mystical operations. Its influence resembles precisely that which is exerted out of church. Its efficiency depends chiefly on the clearness, simplicity, sincerity, love, and zeal, with which the minister speaks to our understandings, consciences, and hearts; just as in common life we are benefited by the clearness and energy with which our friends set before us what is good and pure. The church is adapted to our free moral nature. It acts on us as rational and responsible beings, and serves us through our own efficiency. From these views, we learn that the glory of the church does not lie in any particular government or form, but in the wisdom with which it combines such influences as are fitted to awaken and purify the soul.

Am I asked to state more particularly what these influences are, to which the church owes its efficacy? I reply, that they are such as may be found in all churches, in all denominations. The first is, the *character* of the minister. This has an obvious, immediate, and powerful bearing on the great spiritual purpose of the church. I say his character, not his ordination. Ordination has no end but to introduce into the sacred office men qualified for its duties, and to give an impression of its importance. It is by his personal endowments, by his intellectual, moral, and religious worth, by his faithfulness and zeal, and not through any mysterious ceremony or power, that the minister enlightens and edifies the church. What matters it how he is ordained or set apart, if he give himself to his work in the fear of God? What matters it who has laid hands on him, or whether he stand up in surplice or drab coat? I go to church to be benefited not by hands or coats, but by the action of an enlightened and holy teacher on my mind and heart; not an overpowering, irresistible action, but such as becomes effectual through my own free thought and will. I go to be convinced of what is true, and to be warmed with love of what is good; and he who thus helps me is a true minister, no matter from what school, consistory, or ecclesiastical body he comes. He carries his commission in his soul. Do not say, that his ministry has no "validity," because Rome, or Geneva, or Lambeth, or Andover, or Princeton, has not laid hands on him. What! Has he not opened my eyes to see, and roused my conscience to reprove? As I have heard him, has not my heart burned within

me; and have I not, silently, given myself to God with new humility and love? Have I not been pierced by his warnings, and softened by his looks and tones of love? Has he not taught and helped me to deny myself, to conquer the world, to do good to a foe? Has he done this, and yet has his ministry no "validity?" What other validity can there be than this? If a generous friend gives me water to drink when I am parched with thirst, and I drink and am refreshed, will it do to tell me, that because he did not buy the cup at a certain licensed shop, or draw the water at a certain antiquated cistern, therefore his act of kindness is "invalid," and I am as thirsty and weak as I was before? What more can a minister with mitre or tiara, do than help me, by wise and touching manifestations of God's truth, to become a holier, nobler man? If my soul be made alive, no matter who ministers to me; and if not, the ordinances of the church, whether high or low, orthodox or heretical, are of no validity, so far as I am concerned. The diseased man who is restored to health, cares little whether his physician wear wig or cowl, or receive his diploma from Paris or London; and so, to the regenerate man, it is of little moment where or by what processes he became a temple of the Holy Spirit.

According to these views, a minister deriving power from his intellectual, moral, and religious worth, is one of the chief elements of a true and quickening church. Such a man will gather a true church round him; and we here learn, that a Christian community is bound to do what may aid, and to abstain from what may impair, the virtue, nobleness, spiritual energy of its minister. It should especially leave him free, should wish him to wear no restraints but those of a sense of duty. His office is to utter God's truth according to his apprehension of it, and he should be encouraged to utter it honestly, simply. He must follow his own conscience and no other. How can he rebuke prevalent error without an unawed spirit? Better that he should hold his peace, than not speak from his own soul. Better that the pulpit be prostrated, than its freedom be taken away. The doctrine of "instructions" in politics, is of very doubtful expediency; but that instructions should issue from the congregation to the minister, we all, with one voice, pronounce wrong. The religious teacher, compelled to stifle his convictions, grows useless to his people, is shorn of his strength, loses self-respect, shrinks before his own conscience, and owes it to himself to refrain from teaching. If he be honest, upright, and pure, worthy of trust, worthy of being a minister, he has a right to freedom; and when he uses it conscientiously, though he may err in judgment and may give pain to judicious hearers, he has still a right to respect. There are, indeed, few religious societies which would knowingly make the minister a slave. Many err on the side of submission, and receive his doctrines with blind, unquestioning faith. Still the members of a congregation, conscious of holding the support of their teacher in their hands, are apt to expect a cautious tenderness towards their known prejudices or judgments, which, though not regarded as servility, is very hostile to that firm, bold utterance of truth, on which the success of his ministry chiefly depends.

I have mentioned the first condition of the most useful church; it is the high character of its minister. The second is to be found in the

spiritual character of its members. This, like the former, is, from the very principles of human nature, fitted to purify and save. It was the intention of Christ, that a quickening power should be exerted in a church, not by the minister alone, but also by the members on one another. Accordingly, we read of the "working of every part, every joint," in his spiritual body. We come together in our places of worship, that heart may act on heart; that, in the midst of the devout, a more fervent flame of piety may be kindled in our own breasts; that we may hear God's word more eagerly, by knowing that it is drunk in by thirsty spirits around us; that our own purpose of obedience, may be confirmed by the consciousness that a holy energy of will is unfolding itself in our neighbours. To this sympathy the church is dedicated; and in this its highest influence is sometimes found. To myself, the most effectual church is that in which I see the signs of Christian affection in those around me, in which warm hearts are beating on every side, in which a deep stillness speaks of the absorbed soul, in which I recognise fellow-beings, who in common life have impressed me with their piety. One look from a beaming countenance, one tone in singing from a deeply moved heart, perhaps aids me more than the sermon. When nothing is said, I feel it good to be among the devout; and I wonder not that the Quakers, in some of their still meetings, profess to hold the most intimate union, not only with God, but with each other. It is not with the voice only that man communicates with man. Nothing is so eloquent as the deep silence of a crowd. A sigh, a low breathing, sometimes pours into us our neighbour's soul more than a volume of words. There is a communication more subtile than freemasonry, between those who feel alike. How contagious is holy feeling! On the other hand, how freezing, how palsying is the gathering of a multitude, who feel nothing, who come to God's house without reverence, without love, who gaze around on each other as if they were assembled at a show, whose restlessness keeps up a slightly disturbing sound, whose countenances reveal no collectedness, no earnestness, but a frivolous or absent mind! The very sanctity of the place makes this indifference more chilling. One of the coldest spots on earth is a church without devotion. What is it to me, that a costly temple is set apart by ever so many rites for God's service, that priests who trace their lineage to Apostles, have consecrated it, if I find it thronged by the worldly and undevout. This is no church to me. I go to meet, not human bodies, but souls; and if I find them in an upper room, like that where the first desciples met, or in a shed, or in a street, there I find a church. There is the true altar, the sweet incense, the accepted priest. These all I find in sanctified souls.

True Christians give a sanctifying power, a glory, to the place of worship, where they come together. In them Christ is present and manifested in a far higher sense, than if he were revealed to the bodily eye. We are apt indeed to think differently. Were there a place of worship, in which a glory like that which clothed Jesus on the Mount of transfiguration, were to shine forth, how should we throng to it, as the chosen spot on earth! How should we honour this as eminently his church! But there is a more glorious presence of Christ than this. It is Christ formed in the souls of his disciples. Christ's bodily presence does not make a church. He was thus present in

the thronged streets of Jerusalem, present in the synagogues and temples; but these were not churches. It is the presence of his spirit, truth, likeness, divine love, in the souls of men, which attracts and unites them into one living body. Suppose that we meet together in a place consecrated by all manner of forms, but that nothing of Christ's spirit dwells in us. With all its forms, it is a synagogue of Satan, not a church of Jesus. Christ in the hearts of men, I repeat it, is the only church bond. The Catholics, to give them a feeling of the present Saviour, adorn their temples with paintings, representing him in the most affecting scenes of his life and death; and had worship never been directed to these, I should not object to them. But there is a far higher likeness to Christ than the artist ever drew or chiseled. It exists in the heart of his true disciple. The true disciple surpasses Raphael and Michael Angelo. The latter have given us Christ's countenance from fancy, and at best having little likeness to the mild beauty and majestic form which moved through Judea. But the disciple, who sincerely conforms himself to the disinterestedness, and purity, and filial worship, and all-sacrificing love of Christ, gives us no fancied representation, but the true divine lineaments of his soul, the very spirit which beamed in his face, which spoke in his voice, which attested his glory as the Son of God. The truest church is that which has, in the highest degree, this spiritual presence of our Lord, this revelation of Jesus in his followers. This is the church in which we shall find the greatest aid to our virtue, which outward institution can afford us.

I have thus spoken of the two chief elements of a living and effectual church; a pure, noble-minded minister, and faithful followers of Christ. In the preceding remarks, I have had chiefly in view particular churches, organised according to some particular forms; and I have maintained, that these are important only as ministering to Christian holiness or virtue. There is, however, a grander church, to which I now ask your attention; and the consideration of this will peculiarly confirm the lesson on which I am insisting, namely, that there is but one essential thing, true holiness, or disinterested love to God and man. There is a grander church than all particular ones, however extensive; the Church Catholic, or Universal, spread over all lands, and one with the church in heaven. That all Christ's followers form one body, one fold, is taught in various passages in the New Testament. You remember the earnestness of his last prayer, "that they might all be One, as he and his Father are one." Into this church, all who partake the spirit of Christ are admitted. It asks not, Who has baptised us? Whose passport we carry? What badge we wear? If "baptised by the Holy Ghost," its wide gates are opened to us. Within this church are joined those whom different names have severed or still sever. We hear nothing of Greek, Roman, English churches, but of Christ's church only. My friends, this is not an imaginary union. The Scriptures, in speaking of it, do not talk rhetorically, but utter the soberest truth. All sincere partakers of Christian virtue, are essentially one. In the spirit which pervades them, dwells a uniting power found in no other tie. Though separated by oceans, they have sympathies strong and indissoluble. Accordingly, the clear, strong utterance of one gifted, inspired Chris-

tian flies through the earth. It touches kindred chords in another hemisphere. The word of such a man as Fenelon, for instance, finds its way into the souls of scattered millions. Are not he and they of one church? I thrill with joy at the name of holy men who lived ages ago. Ages do not divide us. I venerate them more for their antiquity. Are we not one body? Is not this union something real? It is not men's coming together into one building which makes a church. Suppose, that, in a place of worship, I sit so near a fellow-creature as to touch him; but that there is no common feeling between us; that the truth which moves me, he inwardly smiles at as a dream of fancy; that the disinterestedness which I honour, he calls weakness or wild enthusiasm. How far apart are we, though visibly so near! We belong to different worlds. How much nearer am I to some pure, generous spirit in another continent, whose word has penetrated my heart, whose virtues have kindled me to emulation, whose pure thoughts are passing through my mind whilst I sit in the house of prayer! With which of these two have I church union?

Do not tell me, that I surrender myself to a fiction of imagination, when I say, that distant Christians, that all Christians and myself, form one body, one church, just as far as a common love and piety possess our hearts. Nothing is more real than this spiritual union. There *is* one grand all-comprehending church; and if I am a Christian I belong to it, and no man can shut me out of it. You may exclude me from your Roman church, your Episcopal church, and your Calvinistic church, on account of supposed defects in my creed or my sect, and I am content to be excluded. But I will not be severed from the great body of Christ. Who shall sunder me from such men as Fenelon, and Pascal, and Boromeo, from Archbishop Leighton, Jeremy Taylor, and John Howard? Who can rupture the spiritual bond between these men and myself? Do I not hold them dear? Does not their spirit, flowing out through their writings and lives, penetrate my soul? Are they not a portion of my being? Am I not a different man from what I should have been, had not these and other like spirits acted on mine? And is it in the power of synod or conclave, or of all the ecclesiastical combinations on earth, to part me from them? I am bound to them by thought and affection; and can these be suppressed by the bull of a pope or the excommunication of a council? The soul breaks scornfully these barriers, these webs of spiders, and joins itself to the great and good; and if it possess their spirit, will the great and good, living or dead, cast it off, because it has not enrolled itself in this or another sect? A pure mind is free of the universe. It belongs to the church, the family of the pure in all worlds. Virtue is no local thing. It is not honourable, because born in this community or that, but for its own independent everlasting beauty. This is the bond of the universal church. No man can be excommunicated from it but by himself, by the death of goodness in his own breast. All sentences of exclusion are vain, if he do not dissolve the tie of purity which binds him to all holy souls.

I honour the Roman Catholic church on one account; it clings to the idea of a Universal Church, though it has mutilated and degraded it. The word Catholic means Universal. Would to God, that the church which has usurped the name had understood the reality! Still Romanism has done something to give to its members the idea

of their connection with that vast spiritual community or church, which has existed in all times and spread over all lands. It guards the memory of great and holy men who in all ages have toiled and suffered for religion, asserts the honours of the heroes of the faith, enshrines them in heaven as beatified saints, converts their legends into popular literature, appoints days for the celebration of their virtues, and reveals them almost as living to the eye by the pictures in which genius has immortalised their deeds. In doing this Rome has fallen indeed into error. She has fabricated exploits for these spiritual persons, and exalted them into objects of worship. But she has also done good. She has given to her members the feeling of intimate relation to the holiest and noblest men in all preceding ages. An interesting and often a sanctifying tie connects the present Roman Catholic with martyrs, and confessors, and a host of men whose eminent piety and genius and learning have won for them an immortality of fame. It is no mean service thus to enlarge men's ideas and affections, to awaken their veneration for departed greatness, to teach them their connection with the grandest spirits of all times. It was this feature of Catholicism, which most interested me in visiting Catholic countries. The services at the altar did not move, but rather pained me. But when I cast my eyes on the pictures on the walls, which placed before me the holy men of departed ages, now absorbed in devotion and lost in rapture, now enduring with meek courage and celestial hope the agonies of a painful death in defence of the truth, I was touched, and I hope made better. The voice of the officiating priest I did not hear; but these sainted dead spoke to my heart, and I was sometimes tempted to feel, as if an hour on Sunday spent in this communion, were as useful to me as if it had been spent in a Protestant church. These saints never rose to my thoughts as Roman Catholics. I never connected them with any particular church. They were to me living, venerable witnesses to Christ, to the power of religion, to the grandeur of the human soul. I saw what men might suffer for the truth, how they could rise above themselves, how real might become the ideas of God and a higher life. This inward reverence for the departed good, helped me to feel myself a member of the church universal. I wanted no pope or priest to establish my unity with them. My own heart was witness enough to a spiritual fellowship. Is it not to be desired, that all our churches should have services to teach us our union with Christ's whole body? Would not this break our sectarian chains, and awaken reverence for Christ's spirit, for true goodness under every name and form? It is not enough, to feel that we are members of this or that narrow communion. Christianity is universal sympathy and love. I do not recommend that our churches should be lined with pictures of saints. This usage must come in, if it come at all, not by recommendation, but by gradual change of tastes and feelings. But why may not the pulpit be used occasionally to give us the lives and virtues of eminent disciples in former ages? It is customary to deliver sermons on the history of Peter, John, Paul, and of Abraham and Elijah and other worthies of the old Testament; and this we do because their names are written in the Bible. But goodness owes nothing to the circumstance of its being recorded in a sacred book, nor loses its claim to grateful, reverent commemoration, because not blazoned

there. Moral greatness did not die out with the Apostles. Their lives were reported for this among other ends, that their virtues might be propagated to future times, and that men might spring up as worthy a place among the canonised as themselves. What I wish is, that we should learn to regard ourselves as members of a vast spiritual community, as joint heirs and fellow worshippers with the goodly company of Christian heroes who have gone before us, instead of immuring ourselves in particular churches. Our nature delights in this consciousness of vast connection. This tendency manifests itself in the patriotic sentiment, and in the passionate clinging of men to a great religious denomination. Its true and noblest gratification is found in the deep feeling of a vital, everlasting connection with the universal church, with the innumerable multitude of the holy on earth and in heaven. This church we shall never make a substitute for virtue.

I have spoken of the Roman Catholic Church. My great objection to this communion is, that it has fallen peculiarly into the error which I am labouring to expose in this discourse, that it has attached idolatrous importance to the institution of the church, that it virtually exalts this above Christ's spirit, above inward sanctity. Its other errors are of inferior importance. It does not offend me, that the Romanist maintains that a piece of bread, a wafer, over which a priest has pronounced some magical words, is the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ. I learn indeed in this error a humbling lesson of human credulity, of the weakness of human reason; but I see nothing in it which strikes at the essential principles of religion. When, however, the Roman Catholic goes farther, and tells me, that God looks with abhorrence on all who will not see in the consecrated wafer Christ's flesh and blood; and when he makes the reception of this from the hands of a consecrated priest, the door into Christ's fold, then I am shocked by the dishonour he casts on God and virtue, by his debasing conceptions of our moral nature and of the Divine, and by his cruel disruption of the ties of human and Christian brotherhood. How sad and strange that a man educated under Christianity, should place religion in a church-connection, in church-rites, should shut from God's family the wisest and the best, because they conscientiously abstain from certain outward ordinances. Is not holiness of heart and life dear to God for its own sake, dear to him without the manipulations of a priest, without the agency of a consecrated wafer? The grand error of Roman Catholicism is its narrow church-spirit, its blind sectarianism, its exclusion of virtuous, pious men from God's favour, because they cannot eat, drink, or pray, according to certain prescribed rites. Romanism has to learn, that nothing but the inward life is great and good in the sight of the Omniscient, and that all who cherish this are members of Christ's body. Romanism is anything but what it boasts to be, the Universal Church. I am too much a Catholic to enlist under its banner.

I belong to the Universal Church; nothing shall separate me from it. In saying this, however, I am no enemy to particular churches. In the present age of the world, it is perhaps best that those who agree in theological opinions, should worship together; and I do not object to the union of several such churches in one denomination, provided that *all* sectarian and narrow feeling be conscientiously and

scrupulously resisted. I look on the various churches of Christendom with no feelings of enmity. I have expressed my abhorrence of the sectarian spirit of Rome; but in that as in all other churches, individuals are better than their creed; and amidst gross error and the inculcation of a narrow spirit, noble virtues spring up and eminent Christians are formed. It is one sign of the tendency of human nature to goodness, that it grows good under a thousand bad influences. The Romish church is illustrated by great names. Her gloomy convents have often been brightened by fervent love to God and man. Her St. Louis, and Fenelon, and Massillon, and Cheverus; her missionaries who have carried Christianity to the ends of the earth; her sisters of charity who have carried relief and solace to the most hopeless want and pain: do not these teach us, that in the Romish church the Spirit of God has found a home? How much, too, have other churches to boast! In the English church, we meet the names of Latimer, Hooker, Barrow, Leighton, Berkely, and Heber; in the dissenting Calvinistic church, Baxter, Howe, Watts, Doddridge, and Robert Hall; among the Quakers, George Fox, William Penn, Robert Barclay, and our own Anthony Benezet and John Woolman; in the Anti-trinitarian church, John Milton, John Locke, Samuel Clarke, Price, and Priestley. To repeat these names does the heart good. They breathe a fragrance through the common air. They lift up the whole race to which they belonged. With the churches of which they were pillars or chief ornaments, I have many sympathies; nor do I condemn the union of ourselves to these or any other churches whose doctrines we approve, provided that we do it, without severing ourselves in the least from the universal church. On this point, we cannot be too earnest. We must shun the spirit of sectarianism, as from hell. We must shudder at the thought of shutting up God in any denomination. We must think no man the better for belonging to our communion; no man the worse for belonging to another. We must look with undiminished joy on goodness, though it shine forth from the most adverse sect. Christ's spirit must be equally dear and honoured, no matter where manifested. To confine God's love or his good spirit to any party, sect, or name, is to sin against the fundamental law of the kingdom of God; to break that living bond with Christ's universal church, which is one of our chief helps to perfection.

I have now given what seem to me the most important views in relation to the church; and in doing this, I have not quoted much from Scripture, because quotations cannot be given fully on this or on any controverted point in the compass of a discourse. I have relied on what is vastly more important, on the general strain and tone of Scripture, on the spirit of the Christian religion, on the sum and substance of Christ's teachings, which is plainly this, that inward holiness, or goodness, or disinterested love, is all in all. I also want time to consider at large the arguments or modes of reasoning by which this or that church sets itself forth as the only true church, and by which the necessity of entering it is thought to be proved. I cannot, however, abstain from offering a few remarks on these.

The principal arguments on which exclusive churches rest their claims, are drawn from Christian history and literature; in other

words, from the records of the primitive ages of our faith, and from the writings of the early fathers. These arguments, I think, may be disposed of by a single remark, that they cannot be comprehended or weighed by the mass of Christians. How very, very few in our congregations can enter into the critical study of ecclesiastical history, or wade through the folios of the Greek and Latin fathers! Now, if it were necessary to join a particular church in order to receive the blessings of Christianity, is it to be conceived that the discovery of this church should require a learning plainly denied to the mass of human beings? Would not this church shine out with the brightness of the sun? Would it be hidden in the imperfect records of distant ages, or in the voluminous writings of a body of ancient authors, more remarkable for rhetoric than for soundness of judgment. The learned cannot agree about these authorities. How can the great multitudes of believers interpret them? Would not the Scriptures guide us by simple sure rules, to the only true church, if to miss it were death? To my own mind this argument has a force akin to demonstration.

I pass to another method of defending the claims which one or another church sets up to exclusive acceptance with God. It is an unwarrantable straining of the figurative language of Scripture. Because the church is spoken of as one body, vine, or temple, theologians have argued that it is one outward organization, to which all men must be joined. But a doctrine built on metaphor is worth little. Every kind of absurdity may find a sanction in figures of speech, explained by tame, prosaic, cold-hearted commentators. The beautiful forms of speech to which I have referred, were intended to express the peculiarly close and tender union which necessarily subsists among all the enlightened and sincere disciples of such a religion as Christ's, a religion, whose soul, essence, and breath of life is Love, which reveals to us in Jesus the perfection of philanthropy, and which calls to us to drink spiritually of that blood of self-sacrifice, which was shed for the whole human race. How infinitely exalted is the union of minds and hearts formed by such a religion, above any outward connection established by rites and forms! Yet the latter has been seized on by the earthly understanding, as the chief meaning of Scripture, and magnified into supreme importance. Has not Paul taught us that there is but one perfect bond, Love?* Has not Christ taught us, that the seal set on his disciples, by which all men are to know them, is Love? Is not this the badge of the true church, the life of the true body of Christ? And is not every disciple, of every name and form, who is inspired with this, embraced indissolubly in the Christian union?

It is sometimes urged by those who maintain the necessity of connection with what they call "the true church," that God has a right to dispense his blessings through what channels or on what terms he pleases; that if he sees fit to communicate his Holy Spirit through a certain priesthood or certain ordinances, we are bound to seek the gift in his appointed way; and that, having actually chosen this method of imparting it, he may justly withhold it from those who refuse to comply with his appointment. I reply, that the right of the in-

* Colossians iii. 14.

finite Father to bestow his blessings in such ways as to his infinite wisdom and love may seem best, no man can be so irreverent as to deny. But is it not reasonable to expect, that he will adopt such methods or conditions as will seem to accord with his perfection? And ought we not to distrust such as seem to dishonour him? Suppose, for example, that I were told that the Infinite Father had decreed to give his Holy Spirit to such as should bathe freely in the sea. Ought I not to require the most plain, undeniable proofs, of a purpose apparently so unworthy of his majesty and goodness, before yielding obedience to it? The presumption against it is exceedingly strong. That the Infinite Father, who is ever present to the human soul, to whom it is unspeakably dear, who has created it for communion with himself, who desires and delights to impart to it his grace, that He should ordain sea-bathing as a condition or means of spiritual communication, is so improbable, that I must insist on the strongest testimony to its truth. Now, I meet precisely this difficulty in the doctrine that God bestows his Holy Spirit on those who receive bread and wine, or flesh and blood, or a form of benediction or baptism, or any other outward ministration, from the hands or lips of certain privileged ministers or priests. It is the most glorious act and manifestation of God's power and love, to impart enlightening, quickening, purifying influences to the immortal soul. To imagine that these descend in connection with certain words, signs, or outward rites, administered by a frail fellow-creature, and are withheld or abridged in the absence of such rites, seems, at first, an insult to his wisdom and goodness; seems to bring down his pure infinite throne, to set arbitrary limits to his highest agency, and to assimilate his worship to that of false gods. The Scriptures teach us, "that God giveth grace to the humble;" that "he giveth his Holy Spirit to them that ask him." This is the great law of divine communications; and we can see its wisdom, because the mind, which hungers for Divine assistances, is most prepared to use them aright. And can we really believe, that the prayers and aspirations of a penitent, thirsting soul, need to be seconded by the outward offices of a minister or priest? Or that for want of these, they find less easy entrance into the ear of the ever-present, all-loving Father? My mind recoils from this doctrine as dishonourable to God, and I ought not to receive it without clear proofs. I want something more than metaphors, or analogies, or logical inferences. I want some express divine testimony. And where is it given? Do we not know, that thousands and millions of Christians, whose lives and death have borne witness to their faith, have been unable to find it in the Scriptures, or anywhere else? And can we believe, that the spiritual communication of such men with the Divinity, has been forfeited or impaired, because they have abstained from rites, which in their consciences they could not recognise as of divine appointment? That so irrational and extravagant a doctrine should enter the mind of a man, who has the capacity of reading the New Testament, would seem an impossibility, did not history show us, that it has been not only believed, but made the foundation of the bitterest intolerance and the bloodiest persecutions.

The notion, that, by a decree of God's sovereign will, his grace or spirit flows through certain rites to those who are in union with a

certain church, and that it is promised to none besides, has no foundation in Scripture or reason. The church, as I have previously suggested, is not an arbitrary appointment; it does not rest on Will, but is ordained on account of its obvious fitness to accomplish the spiritual improvement, which is the end of Christianity. It corresponds to our nature. It is a union of means, and influences, and offices, which rational and moral creatures need. It has no affinity with the magical operations so common in false religions; its agency is intelligible and level to the common mind. Its two great rites, baptism and the Lord's supper, are not meant to act as charms. When freed from the errors and superstitions which have clung to them for ages, and when administered, as they should be, with tenderness and solemnity, they are powerful means of bringing great truths to the mind, and of touching the heart, and for these ends they are ordained. The adaptation of the church to the promotion of holiness among men, is its grand excellence; and where it accomplishes this end, its work is done, and no greater can be conceived on earth or in heaven. The moment we shut our eyes on this truth, and conceive of the church as serving us by forms and ordinances, which are effectual only in the hands of privileged officials or priests, we plunge into the region of shadows and superstitions. We have no ground to tread on, no light to guide us. This mysterious power, lodged in the hands of a few fellow-creatures, tends to give a servile spirit to the mass of Christians, to impair manliness and self-respect, to subdue the intellect to the reception of the absurdest dogmas. Religion loses its simple grandeur, and degenerates into mechanism and form. The conscience is quieted by something short of true repentance; something besides purity of heart and life is made the qualification for heaven. The surest device for making the mind a coward and a slave, is a wide-spread and closely cemented church, the powers of which are concentrated in the hands of a "sacred order," and which has succeeded in arrogating to its rites or ministers a sway over the future world, over the soul's everlasting weal or woe. The inevitable, degrading influence of such a church, is demonstrative proof against its divine original.

There is no end to the volumes written in defence of this or that church, which sets itself forth as the only true church, and claims exclusive acceptance with God. But the unlettered Christian has an answer to them all. He cannot, and need not seek it in libraries. He finds it, almost without seeking, in plain passages of the New Testament, and in his own heart. He reads and he feels that religion is an Inward Life. This he knows, not by report, but by consciousness, by the prostration of his soul in penitence, by the surrender of his will to the Divine, by overflowing gratitude, by calm trust, and by a new love to his fellow-creatures. Will it do to tell such a man, that the promises of Christianity do not belong to him, that access to God is denied him, because he is not joined with this or that exclusive church? Has not this access been granted to him already? Has he not prayed in his griefs, and been consoled? in his temptations, and been strengthened? Has he not found God near in his solitudes, and in the great congregation? Does he thirst for anything so fervently as for perfect assimilation to the Divine purity? And can he question God's readiness to help him, because he is un-

able to find in Scripture a command to bind himself to this or another self-magnifying church? How easily does the experience of the true Christian brush away the cobwebs of theologians! He loves and reveres God, and in this spirit has a foretaste of heaven; and can heaven be barred against him by ecclesiastical censures? He has felt the power of the cross and resurrection and promises of Jesus Christ; and is there any "height or depth" of human exclusiveness and bigotry which can separate him from his Lord? He can die for truth and humanity; and is there any man so swelled by the conceit of his union with the true church, as to stand apart and say, "I am holier than thou?" When by means of the writings or conversation of Christians of various denominations, you look into their hearts, and discern the deep workings, and conflicts and aspirations of piety, can you help seeing in them tokens of the presence and operations of God's spirit, more authentic and touching than in all the harmonies and beneficent influences of the outward universe? Who can shut up this Spirit in any place or any sect? Who will not rejoice to witness it in its fruits of justice, goodness, purity, and piety, wherever they meet the eye? Who will not hail it as the infallible sign of the accepted worshipper of God?

One word more respecting the arguments adduced in support of one or another exclusive church. They are continually and of necessity losing their force. Arguments owe their influence very much to the mental condition of those to whom they are addressed. What is proof to one man is no proof to another. The evidence which is triumphant in one age is sometimes thought below notice in the next. Men's reasonings on practical subjects are not cold, logical processes, standing separate in the mind, but are carried on in intimate connection with their prevalent feelings and modes of thought. Generally speaking, that and that only is truth to a man, which accords with the common tone of his mind, with the mass of his impressions, with the results of his experience, with his measure of intellectual developement, and especially with those deep convictions and biases which constitute what we call character. Now it is the tendency of increasing civilization, refinement, and expansion of mind, to produce a tone of thought and feeling unfriendly to the church spirit, to reliance on church-forms as essential to salvation. As the world advances, it leaves matters of form behind. In proportion as men get into the heart of things, they are less anxious about exteriors. In proportion as religion becomes a clear reality, we grow tired of shows. In the progress of ages, there spring up in greater numbers men of mature thought and spiritual freedom, who unite self-reverence with reverence of God, and who cannot, without a feeling approaching shame and conscious degradation, submit to a church, which accumulates outward, rigid, mechanical observances towards the Infinite Father. A voice within them, which they cannot silence, protests against the perpetual repetition of the same signs, motions, words, as unworthy of their own spiritual powers, and of Him who deserves the highest homage of the reason and the heart. Their filial spirit protests against it. In common life, a refined, lofty mind expresses itself in simple, natural, unconstrained manners; and the same tendency, though often obstructed, is manifested in religion. The progress of Christianity, which must go on, is but another name

for the growing knowledge and experience of that "spiritual worship of the Father," which Christ proclaimed as the end of his mission; and before this, the old, idolatrous reliance on ecclesiastical forms and organizations cannot stand. There is thus a perpetually swelling current which exclusive churches have to stem, and which must sooner or later sweep away their proud pretensions. What avails it, that this or another church summons to its aid fathers, traditions, venerated usages? The Spirit, the Genius of Christianity is stronger than all these. The great ideas of the religion, must prevail over narrow, perverse interpretations of it. On this ground, I have no alarm at reports of the triumphs of the Catholic Church. The Spirit of Christianity is stronger than popes and councils. Its venerableness and divine beauty put to shame the dignities and pomps of a hierarchy; and men must more and more recognise it, as alone essential to salvation.

From the whole discussion, through which I have now led you, you will easily gather how I regard the Church, and what importance I attach to it. In its true idea, or regarded as the union of those who partake in the spirit of Jesus Christ, I revere it as the noblest of all associations. Our common social unions are poor by its side. In the world we form ties of interest, pleasure, ambition. We come together as creatures of time and sense, for transient amusement or display. In the church we meet as God's children; we recognise in ourselves something higher than this animal and worldly life. We come, that holy feeling may spread from heart to heart. The church, in its true idea, is a retreat from the world. We meet in it, that by union with the holy, we may get strength to withstand our common intercourse with the impure. We meet to adore God, to open our souls to his Spirit, and by recognition of the common Father to forget all distinction among ourselves, to embrace all men as brothers. This spiritual union with the holy who are departed and who yet live, is the beginning of that perfect fellowship which constitutes Heaven. It is to survive all ties. The bonds of husband and wife, parent and child, are severed at death; the union of the virtuous friends of God and man is as eternal as virtue, and this union is the essence of the true church.

To the church-relation, in this broad, spiritual view of it, I ascribe the highest dignity and importance. But as to union with a particular denomination or with a society of Christians for public worship and instruction, this, however important, is not to be regarded as the highest means of grace. We ought, indeed, to seek help for ourselves, and to give help to others, by upholding religious institutions, by "meeting together in the name of Christ." The influence of Christianity is perpetuated and extended, in no small degree, by the public offices of piety, by the visible "communion of saints." But it is still true, that the public means of religion are not its chief means. Private helps to piety are the most efficacious. The great work of religion is to be done, not in society, but in secret, in the retired soul, in the silent closet. Communion with God is eminently the means of religion, the nutriment and life of the soul, and we can commune with God in solitude as nowhere else. Here his presence may be most felt. It is by the breathing of the unrestrained soul,

by the opening of the whole heart to "Him who seeth in secret;" it is by reviewing our own spiritual history, by searching deeply into ourselves, by solitary thought, and solitary, solemn consecration of ourselves to a new virtue; it is by these acts, and not by public gatherings, that we chiefly make progress in the religious life. It is common to speak of the house of public worship as a holy place; but it has no exclusive sanctity. The holiest spot on earth is that where the soul breathes its purest vows, and forms or executes its noblest purposes; and on this ground were I to seek the holiest spot in your city, I should not go to your splendid sanctuaries, but to closets of private prayer. Perhaps the "Holy of Holies" among you, is some dark narrow room, from which most of us would shrink as unfit for human habitation; but God dwells there. He hears there music more grateful than the swell of all your organs; sees there a beauty such as nature, in these her robes of spring, does not unfold; for there he meets, and sees, and hears the humblest, most thankful, most trustful worshipper; sees the sorest trials serenely borne, the deepest injuries forgiven; sees toils and sacrifices cheerfully sustained, and death approached through poverty and lonely illness with a triumphant faith. The consecration which such virtues shed over the obscurest spot, is not and cannot be communicated by any of those outward rites, by which our splendid structures are dedicated to God.

You see the rank which belongs to the church, whether gathered in one place or spread over the whole earth. It is a sacred and blessed union; but must not be magnified above other means and helps of religion. The great aids of piety are secret not public. The Christian cannot live without private prayer; he may live and make progress without a particular church. Providence may place us far from the resorts of our fellow-disciples, beyond the sound of the Sabbath-bell, beyond all ordinances; and we may find Sabbaths and ordinances in our own spirits. Illness may separate us from the outward church as well as from the living world, and the soul may yet be in health and prosper. There have been men of eminent piety, who, from conscience, have separated themselves from all denominations of Christians and all outward worship. Milton, that great soul, in the latter years of his life, forsook all temples made with hands, and worshipped wholly in the inward sanctuary. So did William Law, the author of that remarkable book, "The Serious Call to a holy life." His excess of devotion (for in him devotion ran into excess) led him to disparage all occasional acts of piety. He lived in solitude, that he might make life a perpetual prayer. These men are not named as models in this particular. They mistook the wants of the soul, and misinterpreted the Scriptures. Even they, with all their spirituality, would have found moral strength and holy impulse in religious association. But with such examples before us, we learn not to exclude men from God's favour, because severed from the outward church.

The doctrine of this discourse is plain. Inward sanctity, pure love, disinterested attachment to God and man, obedience of heart and life, sincere excellence of character, this is the one thing needful, this the essential thing in religion; and all things else, ministers, churches, ordinances, places of worship, all are but means, helps,

secondary influences, and utterly worthless when separated from this. To imagine that God regards anything but this, that he looks at anything but the heart, is to dishonour him, to express a mournful insensibility to his pure character. Goodness, purity, virtue, this is the only distinction in God's sight. This is intrinsically, essentially, everlastingly, and by its own nature, lovely, beautiful, glorious, divine. It owes nothing to time, to circumstance, to outward connections. It shines by its own light. It is the sun of the spiritual universe. It is God himself dwelling in the human soul. Can any man think lightly of it, because it has not grown up in a certain church, or exalt any church above it? My friends, one of the grandest truths of religion, is the supreme importance of character, of virtue, of that divine spirit which shone out in Christ. The grand heresy is, to substitute anything for this, whether creed, or form, or church. One of the greatest wrongs to Christ, is to despise his character, his virtue in a disciple who happens to wear a different name from our own.

When I represent to myself true virtue or goodness; not that which is made up of outward proprieties and prudent calculations, but that which chooses duty for its own sake, and as the first concern; which respects impartially the rights of every human being; which labours and suffers with patient resolution for truth and others' welfare; which blends energy and sweetness, deep humility and self-reverence; which places joyful faith in the Perfection of God, communes with him intimately, and strives to subject to his pure will all thought, imagination, and desire; which lays hold on the promise of everlasting life, and in the strength of this hope endures calmly and firmly the sorest evils of the present state; when I set before me this virtue, all the distinctions on which men value themselves fade away. Wealth is poor; worldly honour is mean; outward forms are beggarly elements. Condition, country, church, all sink into unimportance. Before this simple greatness I bow, I revere. The robed priest, the gorgeous altar, the great assembly, the pealing organ, all the exteriors of religion, vanish from my sight, as I look at the good and great man, the holy, disinterested soul. Even I, with vision so dim, with heart so cold, can see and feel the divinity, the grandeur of true goodness. How, then, must God regard it! To his pure eye, how lovely must it be! And can any of us turn from it, because some water has not been dropped on its forehead, or some bread put into its lips by a minister or priest; or because it has not learned to repeat some mysterious creed, which a church or human council has ordained?

My friends, reverence virtue, holiness, the upright will which inflexibly cleaves to duty and the pure law of God. Reverence nothing in comparison with it. Regard this as the end, and all outward services as the means. Judge of men by this. Think no man the better, no man the worse, for the church he belongs to. Try him by his fruits. Expel from your breasts the demon of sectarianism, narrowness, bigotry, intolerance. This is not, as we are apt to think, a slight sin. It is a denial of the supremacy of goodness. It sets up something, whether a form or dogma, above the virtue of the heart and the life. Sectarianism immures itself in its particular church as in a dungeon, and is there cut off from the free air, the cheerful light, the goodly prospects, the celestial beauty of the church universal.

My friends, I know that I am addressing those who hold various opinions as to the controverted points of theology. We have grown up under different influences. We bear different names. But if we purpose solemnly to do God's will, and are following the precepts and example of Christ, we are one church, and let nothing divide us. Diversities of opinion may incline us to worship under different roofs, or diversities of taste or habit, to worship with different forms. But these varieties are not schisms; they do not break the unity of Christ's Church. We may still honour, and love, and rejoice in one another's spiritual life and progress, as truly as if we were cast into one and the same unyielding form. God loves variety in nature and in the human soul, nor does he reject it in Christian worship. In many great truths, in those which are most quickening, purifying, and consoling, we all, I hope, agree. There is, too, a common ground of practice, aloof from all controversy, on which we may all meet. We may all unite hearts and hands in doing good, in fulfilling God's purposes of love towards our race, in toiling and suffering for the cause of humanity, in spreading intelligence, freedom, and virtue, in making God known for the reverence, love, and imitation of his creatures, in resisting the abuses and corruptions of past ages, in exploring and drying up the sources of poverty, in rescuing the fallen from intemperance, in succouring the orphan and widow, in enlightening and elevating the depressed portions of the community, in breaking the yoke of the oppressed and enslaved, in exposing and withstanding the spirit and horrors of war, in sending God's Word to the ends of the earth, in redeeming the world from sin and woe. The angels and pure spirits who visit our earth, come not to join a sect, but to do good to all. May this universal charity descend on us, and possess our hearts; may our narrowness, exclusiveness, and bigotry, melt away under this mild celestial fire. Thus we shall not only join ourselves to Christ's Universal Church on earth, but to the invisible Church, to the innumerable company of the just made perfect, in the mansions of everlasting purity and peace.

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